

# Bulgaria

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## Freedom of the Press

The constitution protects freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respects these rights in practice. Defamation is punishable by large fines, and government officials have filed suits against journalists, but the courts tend to favor press freedom in such cases. The law on freedom of information is considered fairly robust, and journalists, with support from nongovernmental organizations, have used it more frequently. However, state institutions sometimes improperly deny information requests, and courts are not consistently supportive of access rights. The broadcasting regulatory body is subject to pressure from the government, politicians, and large corporate interests.

The media environment remains pluralistic, but editors and journalists routinely shape their reporting to suit the political and economic interests of owners or major advertisers. A large portion of the coverage of May 2013 parliamentary elections consisted of paid partisan content, which was often not labeled as such. Some television stations or hosts are explicitly associated with political parties, and those linked to right-wing nationalist factions often carry hate speech aimed at minorities and refugees.

Opaque collusion between media owners and political leaders came to the fore in June 2013, when the Socialist-led ruling coalition appointed 33-year-old Delyan Peevski, de facto owner of the New Bulgarian Media Group (NBMG), as head of the State Agency for National Security. The media house had a history of strongly supporting whichever party was in power, having switched allegiance from the main center-right party after the May elections. Peevski's appointment provoked massive street protests, and it was quickly reversed, but antigovernment demonstrations continued throughout the year amid deep public frustration with corruption in business, the media, and politics.

Reporters continue to face pressure and intimidation aimed at protecting economic, political, and criminal interests. Journalists, commentators, and bloggers are sometimes questioned by law enforcement personnel about their activities, and prominent politicians have displayed intolerance for media criticism. The resignation of several television hosts in August 2013 is suspected to have been the result of a contentious interview with Prime Minister Plamen Oresharski, after which the station temporarily shut down its morning show. In February 2013, then prime minister Boyko Borisov threatened to order investigations into journalists at a press conference who asked about leaked files linking him to organized crime groups in the 1990s.

Physical attacks also occurred during the year. Volen Siderov, leader of the ultranationalist party Ataka, and other party members invaded the offices of state-owned Bulgarian National Television (BNT) in June, claiming that it was biased against him, and separately beat a television crew that tried to interview him the next month. Among other incidents, one well-known television host was assaulted on the street in June, and the vehicle of another was torched in September. Multiple journalists were attacked while covering protests that occurred during the year, particularly during a police crackdown in July. Impunity for crimes against journalists remains the norm, encouraging self-censorship.

A number of private newspapers publish daily, and most are owned by NBMG and its rival, Media Group Bulgaria Holding. Foreign media companies own two of the three leading national television stations, bTV and Nova TV, while the third is BNT. Like Bulgarian National Radio, BNT generally provides substantive news coverage with a range of nonpartisan viewpoints, but the legal structure is influenced by a

questionable level of government interference. Meanwhile, commercial media frequently tailor their coverage to suit the interests of key financial backers, including corporations and national or local government bodies. Foreign firms have also played an important role in the print and radio sectors. Several independent news agencies provide content to commercial outlets.

Concentration remains problematic because ownership transparency rules are weak and poorly enforced. The NBMG conglomerate—which controls multiple print, broadcast, and online outlets as well as the country’s dominant print distribution business—has steadily acquired new media properties across all sectors. The government has been accused of indirectly subsidizing the group through deposits by state entities in an affiliated bank.

The shrinking private advertising market has increased the importance of state advertising and other de facto subsidies, especially for local outlets. Decreasing salaries and job insecurity remain problematic for individual reporters, who are often subject to editorial pressure and unethical journalism.

The declining quality of traditional media has caused many consumers to migrate to online newspapers and other web-based sources of information, which are less prone to economic pressure and self-censorship. The internet penetration rate in 2013 was roughly 53 percent. Social media are extremely popular and played a crucial role in the year’s antigovernment protests.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Partly Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

39

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

11

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

16

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

12